

## Inequality decisions and accounts: the case of tracking in a Swiss elementary school

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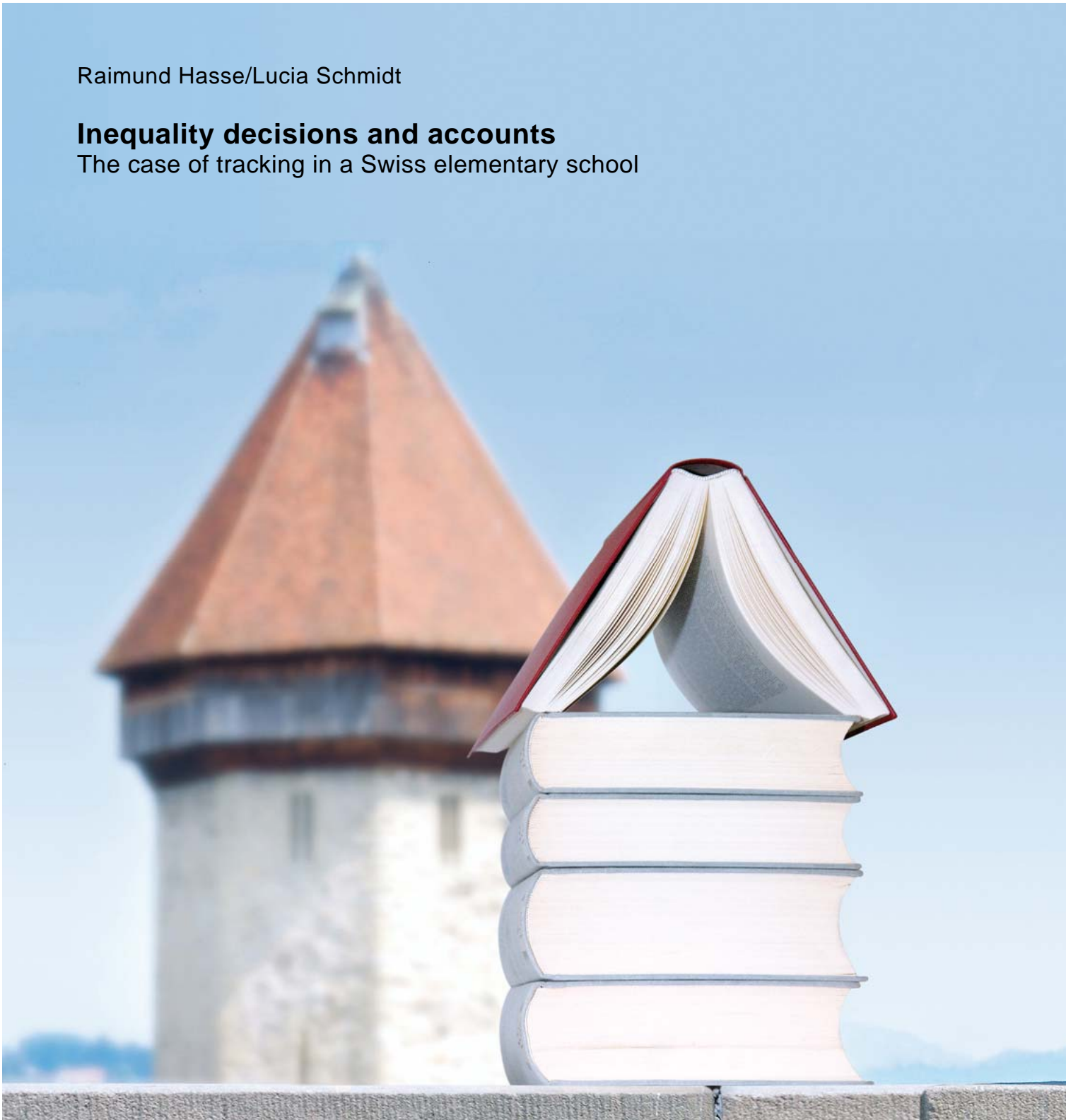
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WORKING PAPER

Raimund Hasse/Lucia Schmidt

**Inequality decisions and accounts**

The case of tracking in a Swiss elementary school





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Workingpaper des Soziologischen Seminars 05/2010

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## Inequality decisions and accounts: The case of tracking in a Swiss elementary school<sup>1</sup>

*Summary:* Decision making in terms of grading and evaluating students significantly contributes to unequal opportunities. In Switzerland, this particularly holds true for the transition from elementary school to the stratified system of secondary schools which often is determined by school authorities. Based on the case study of an elementary school in German Switzerland, this contribution explores accounts to which these decisions are related. Two types of accounts have to be taken into consideration: One type refers to a student's performance. This type of account is documented in a rather technical way. It aims at strengthening the procedural rationality of the decision making process. Another type of accounts is based on material considerations. It refers to decision effects on individual cases. This type of account is communicated to parents in order to achieve consent. The case illustrates that discriminatory decision making can be related to highly institutionalised accounts.

*Keywords:* SOCIAL INEQUALITY, EDUCATION, ORGANIZATION THEORY, ACCOUNTS, INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION.

*WORD COUNT:* APPR. 8900 INCL. REF. & TABLES

### (1) Introduction

Positions in the labour process and the organizational set-up of work profoundly affect issues of stratification (Wright 1997; Sorensen 1994; Stainback et al. 2010). Though a distinct impact of educational achievement is more open for discussion (Bowles & Gintis 1976, 2002), there is a growing awareness that education matters as well. Education can contribute to social positioning due to its impact on the entry into the labour market (Shavit & Müller 1998; OECD 2000), and many occupations and professions require a minimum of educational degrees.

Not unlike recruitment practices and career issues at work, educational achievement significantly is determined by organizational decision making about selection and promotion. Against this background, we focus on how organizational decision making in education contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. The empirical case refers to the tracking of students which, in our case, is in the responsibility of teachers and school authorities. A particular emphasis will be on accounts which frame these decisions. We will show

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is based on the research project "Organization and Inequality. An Empirical Investigation in Institutional Settings and Accounts of Decision Making at Schools" which is funded by the Swiss National Funds (SNF).

that the focussed decisions are embedded in a dense net of accounts which aim at legitimation and consent. One type of accounts informs about achievements and aims at legitimating assignment decisions by formal means. This type presents a student's performance and behavioural attitudes which are documented in a rather technical way in order to strengthen the procedural rationality. Another type of accounts is based on broader cultural considerations. It refers to material effects on individual cases. The holistic estimation of a student's future potential, the need to protect him or her against excessive demands, and accordance with the supposed long-range aspirations of a student are examples for this type of account. Though both types of accounts represent highly institutionalised values of contemporary societies, they significantly contribute to the reproduction of inequalities which are based on social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship.

Basic insights into the stratification-effect of organizational structures have been offered by Arthur Stinchcombe (1965) who emphasized on the organizational foundation of available social positions. In this perspective, social structures are determined by organizational forms. Stinchcombe also argued that relations between social positions are regulated by organizations – hierarchies in universities, e.g., have a very different meaning as compared with hierarchies in a military context. Another general perspective on the organizational base of inequality has been provided by Charles Perrow (2002). Perrow focused on work organizations and convincingly showed that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century US-society profoundly has been moulded by work and occupations in large corporations. Compared with small and medium enterprises and corresponding forms of market and network exchange, large corporations are more complex. They allow for both more social differentiation and more fine tuned mobility, Perrow argued. Thirdly, organization research has investigated a great bulk of case studies in which the impact of organizational forms on unequal opportunities has been analyzed. In these studies it has been shown that organizational core features such as size and age of corporations do have profound impacts on social positioning and on issues of mobility (cf., e.g., Pfeffer 1977; Baron 1984; Brüderl et al. 1993; Haveman & Cohen 1994). It also has been shown that managerial recruitment practices and decisions with respect to promotions tend to reproduce social inequalities by discriminating minorities and women (Bielby & Baron 1986). A particular focus, here, has been on effects of formalizing the recruitment process (cf. Baron et al. 2007 and Castilla 2008 for a discussion of findings) and on the professionalization of Human Resource Management (HRM) in the context of regulating Equal Opportunity Laws (cf. Dobbin 2009).

A second frame of reference is provided by the new institutionalism. In a sharp contrast to most organization theories, new institutionalism ever since has focussed on non-economic organizations. Public administration, social services and educational institutions were initial objects of investigation (cf. DiMaggio & Powell 1991; Scott 1995). With respect to issues of inequality, the work of John Meyer is particularly important. Meyer focussed on education as reducing the tension between an egalitarian Western culture on the one hand and the social reality of different classes and layers on the other (Meyer 1977). However, he also emphasized on strong normative pressures on education to comply with mediocratic principles and to overcome any form of social discrimination (Meyer 2001). Meyer and colleagues also found out that the last decades have witnessed a worldwide expansion of mass education (Meyer et al. 1992). Nationally orchestrated schooling has diffused in almost any part of the world and, at least in the Northern hemisphere, children of any cultural and class background have become objects of schooling. At the same time, the amount of education has grown significantly.

Referring to this educational expansion, modernization theorists had expected that inequality in education will be reduced in the longer run. However, these expectations have been disappointed profoundly (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Shavit & Blossfeld 1993). Regardless to national variations in the details, durable inequalities of educational opportunities still are a persistent trans-national problem (Hodges Persell et al. 2004). In education research, underachievement of disadvantaged social groups predominantly is explained by referring to students and their family background and milieux. Accordingly, a great bulk of research has focussed on individual characteristics (language competences and socialization prior to schooling) and on impacts of the family context (educational background of the parents; material living conditions; appreciation of educational achievement etc. pp.). It has been argued that such characteristics and contextual features result in (a) unequal starting conditions and (b) in decision making of students and parents which is in line with the socio-economic status. The school system, then, may be criticized for not actively compensating the effects of such inequalities, but it is not considered as a cause of inequality of educational achievement.

Other researchers have insisted that educational systems are actively involved in the production of educational disadvantages – and, in so doing, reproduce inequality structures of contemporary societies (Chubb & Moe 1988; Lucas 1999). These lines of research help to redirect the attention from students and their background and decision making to teachers and school authorities (Cicourel & Kitsuse 1963; Oakes 1985). But how can we explain



the robustness of effects which are not in line with ideals and policies of fairness and equal opportunity - and which also appear to be a rather irrational allocation of scarce resources? The classical answer provided by the new institutionalism was to argue that the links between the technical core of educational institutions and the formal structures at school are weak because the former is rooted in local and idiosyncratic practices while the latter reflect social expectations (Meyer et al. 1978; Meyer et al. 1981; Meyer & Scott 1983). According to this interpretation, there is a loose coupling between practices such as teaching, evaluating and grading on the one hand and official guidelines and programs on the other (Meyer & Rowan 1977).

In a retrospect reflection of this perspective, H.D. Meyer & B. Rowan (2006) recently have argued that “new social developments ... have produced novel institutional practices with which institutional theory and research have yet to catch up” (Meyer & Rowan 2006: 2). The authors refer to new organizational forms which have tightened the coupling between practices and formal structure. The argument goes that standardized tests of students and continuous evaluations of school performances produce data which easily can be communicated to authorities and to the public. At the same time there is an increase of competition among schools. In sum, these changes both require and enable to reduce the degree of loose coupling of formal structures and its representation on the one hand and practices such as teaching, evaluating and grading on the other.

Against this background, our contribution addresses departures from norms and ideals of fairness and equal opportunity not as idiosyncratic variations of practical decision making at schools. Neither do we believe that the development emphasized by Meyer & Rowan (2006) has spread so equally across any institutional context that effects and mechanisms would not deserve a closer look. Instead, we argue in favour of an empirical investigation in contexts in which practical decision making results in pronounced forms of inequality. In line with the common ground of organization research, we assume that such practical decision making is more or less, but never perfectly, rational. Furthermore we assume that issues of agency are unequivocal. To some extent teachers may act on behalf of their own interests, but at the same time they decide as agents of their school authorities and in line with their professional identities. Practical decision making, then, mediates between these frames of references. This makes decision making a complex endeavour. Nonetheless is practical decision making about tracking and grading of students an ongoing and repetitive task. We thus finally assume that such decision making is embedded in accounts which refer to the tension between egalitarian ideals and discriminating outcomes. In this per-

spective, accounts of repetitive routinized decision making are not considered to be just ex post-legitimations. Instead, they also serve as premises of subsequent decisions.

## **(2) Case and approach**

There is profound statistical evidence for the fact that positions in the education system are allocated according to social categories - regardless to whether or not the causes of this effect are to be located in the school system or elsewhere. The Swiss education system offers some illustrations. For example, the chance for a student with a migration background with origins from former Yugoslavia for receiving a degree of tertiary education approximately is 1 to 17 whereas for a Swiss student without that background the chance is close to 1 to 3 (cf. Mey et al. 2005: 144).<sup>2</sup> The empirical evidence for such unequal opportunities can hardly be put into question. But what are its causes?

If we do not exclude the possibility that the school system might contribute to this effect, attention gets directed towards the ways teachers evaluate students, make decisions and give recommendations. Teachers' evaluations, decisions and recommendations predominantly are based on grading. Grading is an integral part of almost any school practice. Tracking and herein inscribed hierarchies<sup>3</sup>, by contrast, differ profoundly and with respect to school systems. While in many countries tracking is a form of stratification within schools, some school systems are characterized by a hierarchical differentiation of types of schools. Most often, the latter sort of tracking is to be found in secondary schools, but the age of entry into secondary schools varies (most often between age 10 and 12). So does the number of types of secondary schools (most often between 2 and 4).<sup>4</sup>

Firstly, tracking is affected by the availability of tracks which differs substantially - across national systems and within nations across regions and districts. A second difference is

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the category "student with migration background" also covers so-called "secundos" – i.e. students whose parents have immigrated to Switzerland.

<sup>3</sup> We define hierarchies with respect to the exclusion of options. While those on the top of a hierarchy have any option for further educational development and for any entry into the labour market, those at the bottom only have a restricted range of options. Some degrees of secondary school, e.g., open up the door for tertiary education and for university degrees which are required for many professions. Those who achieve this sort of qualification, however, may also choose occupations or unskilled jobs which do not require certificates of that school level. Those from the latter type of secondary school, however, have no option for university training and for occupations which require such training. Thus, their range of options is restricted.

<sup>4</sup> Tracking also is crucial with respect to the extreme ends of a school system. Elite schools on the one hand and schools for special treatment on the other hand may serve as examples.

made by the ways the allocation to tracks is organized. Sometimes, tracking predominantly results from a student's choice which then has profound impacts on further options and choices. In other cases, tracking initially is heavily influenced or even determined by teachers and school authorities which more or less rigorously refer to grades (or other test scores). Referring to such arrangements, German sociologists Gomolla & Radtke (2002) have focussed on institutional discrimination resulting from the decision making of teachers and school authorities. Based on a broad range of organization theories they have argued that decision making processes systematically disfavour students with a migration background. Though the developed argument is quite complex, it can be summarized as follows:

- decision making by teachers and school authorities is based on school-related functional requirements,
- it takes organizational interests into consideration,
- it refers to environmental expectations which simultaneously constrain and serve as a resource pool, and,
- it is an object of retrospective sense-making.

In sum, organizations are presented as powerful and reflexive actors which have the capacity to make decisions based on more or less rational principles and in line with a distinct institutional logic. As a consequence, discrimination is to be seen as side effect – i.e., not intended, but nonetheless the outcome of rational considerations.

Our contribution seeks to further develop this institutional perspective. Our conceptual point of departure from the aforementioned approach of Gomolla & Radtke (2002) is two-fold: Firstly, we argue that whether or not decision making is determined by organizational interests, rationalities, logics etc. is an open empirical question while the assumption that schools serve as institutional context which continuously and routinely produces decisions on students is less controversial. Secondly and as decision making is to be considered as an ongoing organizational practice, there is no sequential order of decision making and retrospect accounts (sense-making and rationalization). Instead, accounts also serve as premises for subsequent decisions. Hence, an in depth-analysis of accounts is an appropriate research strategy to investigate in decision making practices in institutionalised contexts.

Starting point for developing this research perspective is the insight that school selection, tracking, displacement, and school exclusion are based on decision making in schools, sometimes on a group level (e.g. in conferences) and often in collaboration with students

and parents who then may influence the decision process and outcome. Our study refers to Switzerland. It concentrates on exploring discriminatory mechanisms that characterize the assignment of students from elementary to secondary school. As in other European countries, the school system in Switzerland is characterized by different types of secondary schools - low level or higher level schools, e.g. schools with basic or extended demands. At the end of their time in elementary school - which most often is about 6 years - young students are assigned to a certain type of secondary school. Due to federalist principles, details of the assignment vary between and even within cantons. The common ground, however, is that class teachers' evaluations and recommendations significantly determine the assignment. Since later mobility between types of secondary school is extremely low, this assignment decision has profound impacts on the entire educational and occupational life course (Buchmann et al. 1993).

As shown in empirical evaluations of decision outcomes and in experiments using manipulated files, students with a migration background tend to be disadvantaged systematically in these decisions – in particular if they are male and have achieved more or less average results (Coradi Vellacott & Wolter 2005). According to longitudinal studies and current statistical data, the ethnic and cultural origin of a student still is a key determinant of academic success (BFM 2006, SKBF 2006). In 2004, about 50.000 of overall 192.467 students with migration background attended schools with only basic demands ("Sonder- und Realschulen"). The proportion of children attending such schools in the immigrant population added up to 26% and was about twice as high as in the native population (13%). In the same year, just 22,8% of the native students finished obligatory school time (after 9 years) in a school with only basic demands, while the proportion of students with migration background was nearly twice as high, more precise about 43% (BFM 2006).

Discrimination with respect to social categories also becomes evident when we take national test scores into consideration. For example, for those in the Swiss German cantons who achieved average results in national tests in Maths and German the probabilities for being assigned to "Realschule" (lower level secondary school) varies significantly. If we combine citizenship (Swiss or Non-Swiss) with gender categories these differences are put to an extreme: 83% of the Swiss girls who achieved average results are assigned to the higher level secondary school. The chance for their male Non-Swiss mates with the same results, by contrast, is only 37% (Haeberlin et al. 2004: 14). It thus is not an exaggeration to argue that social categories significantly determine the assignment to secondary school.

Against this background, the decision process which produces this outcome deserves a closer look. The case at hand focuses on decision making processes and corresponding accounts in an elementary school which is located in the countryside of German Switzerland. It stems from an ongoing research project which is funded by the Swiss National Funds (SNF). The project deals with schools as an organizational context which significantly contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. It addresses the robustness of uneven success rates with respect to the educational achievement of ethnic minorities. The specific focus is the assignment of students into the stratified order of secondary schools after 6 years at elementary school. Methodologically, the project is based on case studies in which decision processes and corresponding accounts are analysed by using documents and files on the one hand and in depth interviews and group interviews with teachers and principals on the other.

After describing formal accounts which guide the decision making process (3), we refer to broader cultural accounts which are also utilized when teachers communicate their decision to parents and students (4). In the final section (5) research findings are summarized and related to each other. We will show that in our case decision making with discrimination effects on the one hand is framed by a complex decision procedure which is based on the production of forms and files in order to symbolically demonstrate that the process is in line with rational and fair principles of modern organizations. On the other hand it is embedded in cultural accounts which significantly contribute to the legitimation of decision outcomes by highlighting on material and practical considerations of individual cases.

### **(3) Formal accounts in the decision making process**

The need to make an assignment decision and the criteria which have to be applied in this decision process are determined by legal, political and administrative constraints. One frame of reference in our case study are the cantonal rules of procedure for the promotion of students. Three paragraphs are particularly important. § 16 states that after six years at elementary school, students have to be assigned to one out of three types of secondary schools. Besides “Werkschule” which is very exceptional and for those with learning disabilities and behavioural problems there are two regular types – “Realschule” (basic level) and “Sekundarschule” (advanced level). §§ 20 – 21 refer to assignment criteria. The norm is expressed that assignment should be based on (a) parents` consent, (b) talent, interests, and career aspirations of the pupil, and (c) potential further development with respect to educational achievement. Though it is regulated that grades in three subjects (Maths,

German, Science) and behavioural attitudes should be taken into consideration, the evaluation of talent, interests, and career aspirations (cf. b) and future potential (cf. c) are characterized by a high degree of interpretative flexibility. This matter of fact puts heavy weight on the informed consent of parents.

In political objectives and administrative inputs this emphasis is backed. Parents' agreement on the assignment decision is explicitly intended. At the same time further criteria are brought in. Among those is the expectation of the board of directors of education of "Inner Switzerland" (a federation of small peasant cantons in German Switzerland) that 2/3 of the pupils should be assigned to "Sekundarschule" and 1/3 should be sent to "Realschule". In combination, both requirements result in the need to gain acceptance of one third of the parents that their children will be assigned to a secondary school with only basic demands.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there is a third recommendation for the assignment decision. It refers to the average grade pupils achieve in the first semester of the 6<sup>th</sup> year:

*Table 1: Recommended Secondary School according to achieved average grades in 3 subjects (Maths, German and Science)*

<i>Grade</i>	<i>recommendation</i>	<i>ambiguity</i>
4.8 – 6.0	advanced secondary school ("Sekundarschule")	low
4.3 – 4.8	no clear recommendation	high
3.8 – 4.3	basic secondary school ("Realschule")	low
1.0 – 3.8	"Werkschule" (learning disabilities, behavioural problems)	low

In combination, the diversity of objectives and criteria is striking. One thus may be taken by surprise that, in the years 2003 - 2009, the achieved results have come very close to any of these expectations:

1. assignment to "Werkschule" is as exceptional as intended (less than 2%),
2. the assignment rate to advanced secondary school and to basic secondary school deviates less than 3% from the norm (2/3 to "Sekundarschule", 1/3 to "Realschule"),
3. parents' persistent disagreement with the assignment decision is extremely exceptional.

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<sup>5</sup> Here it should be noted that this secondary school does neither offer any option for a subsequent tertiary education, nor does it qualify for a more sophisticated vocational training.

In order to understand how any of these objectives are met in practice we need to refer to the orchestration of the decision making. The formal decision process is composed of 8 steps with different parties being involved. During the process, many files and documents need to be filled, and some forms need to be signed. The process starts for 6-graders at the beginning of the school year and can be summarized as shown in table 2.

*Table 2: Steps in the formal procedure of allocating students from elementary to secondary school.*

<i>step</i>	<i>month of academic year</i>	Class teachers` tasks
1	1 (August)	Class teacher informs students and parents about the subsequent procedure (parents` attendance is obligatory; in case of absence they are informed via mail).
2	4 (November)	Class teacher discusses achieved test scores and his or her assignment-expectation individually with student and parents (parents` attendance is obligatory).
3	6 (January)	Class teacher informs the affiliating secondary school about the tentative assignment.
4	8 (March)	Class teacher sends 1 <sup>st</sup> semester-school report to parents. The reports include grades in German, Maths and Science and grades for behavioural performance.
5	8 (March)	Class teacher either meets with student and parents in order to achieve consent about the determination of allocating to secondary school or, in unproblematic cases, informs via mail or telephone.
6	9 (April)	Class teacher and parents sign the “assignment decision-form” which is sent to the principal (who formally notifies the affiliating school).

Though the final assignment decision is made by school officials of the elementary school – and neither by representatives of affiliating secondary schools nor by parents (and students) – informed consent of the latter is required to close the file. Against the background of the significance of the transition from elementary to secondary school for educational achievement it may come as a surprise that such consent in most cases is achieved. The final consent, then, is signed by class teachers and parents in the aftermath of the meeting of the class teacher with the parents of his students in the 8<sup>th</sup> month (cf. step 6 in table 2).

If parents (and student) do not agree with the recommendation of the class teacher, an alternative process gets started. This alternative process is triggered by the class teacher who formally informs the principal about the non-agreement. What follows are three steps in which the parents need to argue against school officials in order to convince them that their child should be assigned not as recommended by the class teacher. Any of these steps offers an exit option which is chosen if one of the parties agrees on the suggestion of the other.<sup>6</sup>

These are the steps:

1. The principal invites the parents and discusses the issue with them. The discussion is based on a broad range of documents which provide detailed technical information about the student's achievement. Any of these information, however, are related to the student's class performance - no reference is made, e.g., to national or international tests or to intelligence tests. At its core are the grades provided by the teachers of the student. If this meeting results in an agreement, the case is back on track and the affiliating secondary school can be informed about the assignment of the student.
2. If the dispute persists, the case can be negotiated with the school council who places a vote on the issue. Class teacher and principal may participate and give recommendations, but have no distinct vote in this committee. If the result of this additional arbitration is accepted, the definitive assignment form is filled and the affiliating secondary school is informed. If parents still do not agree, they can file a complaint.
3. The complaint is sent to the cantonal director of education who then draws a final decision. This step may outlast the school year, so that it is important to notice that the student is sent provisionally to the secondary school which has been recommended by the school officials – and not in accordance with the aspirations of student or parents.

The process of making an assignment decision which is line with the legal and political-administrative constraints is framed by additional practices. Some of these practices are school-related, others are procedures which class teachers routinely apply. Before referring to these practices, it should be noted that many teachers indicate to have a clear guess about the assignment of their students prior to the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Sometimes

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<sup>6</sup> Needless to say that, in practice, this option requires that the parents are convinced to accept the recommendation of teachers and school authorities.



they already know the student from the past. In other cases, teachers can get information about a student from other teachers, particularly from former class teachers. There also is a twofold incorporation of secondary teachers. Secondary teachers participate in the information meeting for students and parents at the beginning of the school year in order to present their type of school, and they meet on a regular basis in the midst of a school year with teachers from elementary school in order to provide them with a feed back about the last cohort of students. This meeting is institutionalised and results in a document which summarizes the meeting.

Though the official objective of the first individual meeting of a class teacher with a student and his or her parents is only to inform about preliminary results and to find an agreement on the expected assignment, this meeting has profound anchoring effects on the further process. In order to achieve consent, class teachers gather a broad range of information in advance. E.g., they present a portfolio of the student which has been infused with data in the prior weeks. The portfolio summarizes test results, working behaviour and social attitudes. Often, they also can present a self evaluation of the student which includes his or her estimation of educational achievement and aspirations. This self evaluation is written during school time and in the classroom. It may inform about different perspectives and aspirations of student and parents. Furthermore, parents have filled out an observation form with respect to behaviour and attitudes of the student outside school. Finally, in cases which are ambiguous or non-consensual, class teachers suggest to sign a letter of intent which addresses objectives for the student in the months to come. The fulfilment of these objectives then is expected in order to be allocated to the preferred secondary school (i.e., in most cases, “Sekundarschule”). Class teachers may also incorporate other elementary school-teachers in the process by gathering information from them or by inviting them to participate in the meeting with parents and student. Finally, some teachers suggest to consult other experts (e.g. school psychologists) or to conduct tests, e.g. on competencies in the native language in the case of immigrants.

To sum up, class teachers tend to be prepared for the first individual meeting. They are able to refer to a rich body of information in order to argue in favour of their recommendation. Another characteristic feature of this meeting is that the preliminary character of the recommendation is emphasized. On that base, class teachers can easily deal with contrasting points of view. In ambiguous cases, they try to find consent about the further process and about criteria which, at a later point in time, can help to determine the as-

signment. Parents are only expected to agree on this procedure and leave the outcome open.

It should be noted that the entire decision process is accompanied by the production and evaluation of a broad range of documents which cover data and information about the student. These documents have the character of formal accounts which inform about abilities, competencies, achievements and future perspectives of the student. Some of them are obligatory, others are additional. A great bulk of these documents is produced and evaluated prior to the first meeting. They help to find a common ground and to agree on the future perspectives of the student. In case of deviating expectations gathering further data and information has the character of a procedural consent. For school authorities, however, these data and information will also help to determine and to legitimise the final assignment decision. The broad range of formal accounts in the form of exams, evaluations, filled forms and documents may be summarized as follows:

Table 3: Formal accounts which may inform the assignment decision and help to legitimise it

<p><u>Degree of institutionalisation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- high (obligatory) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- medium (routinely applied to all ambiguous and controversial cases)</li> <li>- low (applied only in exceptional cases)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><u>Documents</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- many class tests-results</li> <li>- other marked examinations</li> <li>- students` self evaluation</li> <li>- parents` observation form</li> <li>- preliminary assignment form <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- parents` letter of intent</li> <li>- detailed performance portfolio <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- further expert tests (psychology, native language competences etc.)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>- school report 6.1,</li> <li>- final assignment form (if accepted)</li> <li>- school report 6.2</li> </ul>

In order to demonstrate the complexity of the entire process one can also list the involved actors in order of appearance and with respect to the script of an consensual assignment of 6-graders. The result looks as follows. In case of the most lean standard procedure we find:

Table 4: Core actors, roles and expected behaviour

<i>core actors</i>	<i>roles and expectations</i>
students (6 <sup>th</sup> grade):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are objects of evaluations</li> <li>- attend parents/teachers-meetings</li> <li>- produce self-evaluations which inform about aspirations and behaviour</li> </ul>
parents:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- receive information about assignment process</li> <li>- express ambitions</li> <li>- fill out observation forms which inform about behaviour</li> <li>- agree or do not agree with assignment decision</li> <li>- may file a complaint</li> </ul>
class teacher:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- inform students and parents about the procedure</li> <li>- make suggestions about secondary school</li> <li>- aim at parents` consent and let them sign</li> <li>- decide preliminarily and inform secondary school</li> <li>- process the assignment decision form to the principal</li> </ul>

Additionally, we find roles in the background which are providers of further information or which fulfil representative functions. Teachers of secondary schools, e.g., inform parents about their type of school in the first month of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (cf. step 1). Furthermore, they provide a feed back for teachers of elementary schools about problems in the initial phase of secondary school. Principals, by contrast, have a representative function by notifying the affiliating school according to the assignment decision of the class teacher. In case of non-agreement, however, they become more active and further actors enter the stage.

Table 5: Further actors and their roles (in case of parents' ambiguity and/or disagreement with class teachers' recommendation)

<i>actors</i>	<i>roles according to the script</i>
psychological experts (exceptional):	- provide individual information about the student
other experts (very exceptional):	- provide information with respect to cultural background - provide information about competences in mother language etc.
principal:	- meets with parents in order to achieve consent.
school council:	- meets with parents and places a vote
cantonal governor for education:	- draws a final decision

It needs to be noted that up to the last point the dispute still has not become a legal case. However, parents need to invest a great bulk of time and energy in this process (as teachers and school authorities, one may add). Furthermore, they need social skills and communicative competencies to discuss the issue convincingly. One thus may argue that the decision process requires resources which are not equally distributed among parents. Teachers and school authorities, on the other hand, are well aware about such differences. They have also clear guesses about which parents or types thereof might not accept a recommendation to a lower level secondary school. In the formal procedure, however, any of such considerations remains in the background.

#### (4) Collectively available verbal accounts

According to Orbuch (1997), much of the more recent work on accounts refers to statements as social explanations of events. As compared with initial contributions, scholars have also broadened the agenda by focussing on 'story-like' interpretations or explanations. In this line of research, respondents are often asked to explain and interpret a stressful event (e.g. divorce) or the development of a relationship (e.g. courtship and, thereafter, marriage). Recent theoretical developments also emphasize the process by which individuals develop accounts (account-making), while continuing to focus on the specific contents of accounts, the major theme in earlier work (e.g. Scott & Lyman 1968). Relating this perspective to our case, we find that school personnel - teachers and principal - emphasizes that a good assignment decision has been made "when everybody is contend with it".<sup>7</sup> That is to say: While teachers have the right and obligation to make a recommenda-

<sup>7</sup> Quotations stem from individual or group interviews with teachers and principals which have been conducted and analysed in the context of the aforementioned project.

tion, they aim at a joint decision. In what follows we present main arguments and narratives teachers refer to in order to achieve consent when discussions with parents indicate that they have objections against the recommended assignment.

a) Accordance with aspirations and long-range ambitions

References to the ambitions of students can be found in the context of teachers' descriptions of observed attitudes of a student. When it comes to the recommended secondary school, the teacher may draw upon concrete statements of will made by the child. One teacher describes this situation as follows: "And then there are children who say: 'I actually don't want to go to Sekundarschule', but the parents want their child to attend that type of school ... We had a girl whose mother was favouring Sekundarschule very much. And in the last meeting she finally told us: 'I've talked to my child and she doesn't want to go there, she says she'd be in the wrong place there'. So we had to say to the mother: 'Then it's even more clear now, isn't it?... If the child declares that it doesn't want to go there, then it's already lost, in these cases. Then it's obvious that it won't function' (teacher 1).

Another aspect that a teacher may bring in is the supposed long-term aspiration of the child: "I always try to get a feeling for the child's intention. Is it to own a Ferrari as soon as possible? Is it to build a house? I tend to assume now that happiness is the main intention ... Satisfaction. Satisfaction can be reached by small means..., a high school diploma doesn't mean that you are a happy person ... A good education, a good job may help, but the feat is to find a way - that is what happiness means to me. Am I happy attending the Realschule? ... I try to explain this to the parents" (teacher 2). Another teacher states: "An important aspect (for assignment decisions) is that the child learns to evaluate itself appropriately in these last two years (in primary school). We sometimes talk about this: 'Which direction do you see for yourself later on?' It doesn't have to be a concrete occupation, but they should develop some ideas ... There are also some children in the sixth or even in the fifth grade who are able to formulate their career aspiration very clearly, and later on they realize it" (teacher 6).

Teacher statements concerning the aspirations of students with a migration background are somewhat instructive. Although not continuously and strongly expressed, the device is related to a lack of ambition that often characterizes (male) students - especially boys from former Yugoslavia. One of the clear-cut statements is: "I think it's a pity that children with

migration background, even if born in Switzerland so they should be integrated, are influenced by a special mentality ... In all these years, I've seen very few students with a migration background and a healthy ambition ... I'd say that most of them are predisposed by their peer group, by the group they belong to. They are not willing to achieve. I don't think it's a problem of intelligence, it's just a lack of interest" (teacher 2).

b) Protection against unrealistic academic demands

According to most teachers, school grades are an important indicator, but underlying competencies and learn and work habits often make a difference which has to be taken into consideration for the child's benefit. In a group interview a teacher explains: "It may well be that someone achieves a 5,0 while going to private lessons five times a week ... But when the speed of learning gets faster and there are higher demands, then they cannot maintain these efforts ... It's always a question then, because assignment is always prognosis. You look for existing possibilities and resources..., how will the child react when confronted with higher demands in short time and from different sides? Will the child fall behind?" (teacher 5). In a similar vein, another teacher argues: "So the question is what about the ability of the person to work under pressure ... Referring to a case he'd heard of in another canton: "The parents decided that sufficient grades are not enough. The teacher also suggested before, that the boy would be stressed too much. So the parents didn't want that their child had to struggle for years only for attending a gymnasium" (teacher 1). In the sub-sequential group discussion, a teacher returned to her example of a student with a good average grade (5,0): "This may be a very intelligent person who's not working at all, but still achieves a 5,0. Another person with very limited potentials also may achieve a 5,0, but he's squeezing the lemon to the last drop. Here we go again with issues of prognosis, resources and prospects, which turn out to be very different although they both have the same grades" (teacher 5).

By referring to child protection, teachers may also propose an interim solution, as it happened in case of a student with grades around 4,5 and a work habit that deemed to be good though - as the teachers describe it - being exhausting for the child: "He had a work habit that would have enabled us to say 'OK, he's engaging and could possibly make it, but he's already too much under pressure from our point of view... We felt that it would be good for him to attend Realschule for just one year ...and we proposed: 'Let the boy attend Realschule at first for one year, just to catch his breath, learning matters are not that difficult there, there is more repetition ...'. It's just one year later that he'd change to Se-

kundarschule, but it's not a year that's lost. The mother saw it from a very different point of view ..." (teacher 1).

c) Protection against excessive demands by parents

According to the teachers, parents who do not agree with the teacher recommendation often have unrealistic ideas and over-ambitious ideals and visions of what their child is able to achieve. As put in the group discussion by several teachers: Although parents might know their own children quite well in other respects, they do not have an appropriate picture of its scholastic profile and of its academic potential. The challenge of the class teacher, then, is – as described by the principal - to enlighten the parents, often just by comparing the achievements of the child with the achievements of other class members. A special difficulty is mentioned by the teachers: parents sometimes try to practice a form of self-fulfilment at the expense of their child. According to this perspective, a child has to reach for aims and achieve a standard of living which the parents may have wanted for themselves, but could not achieve. A teacher spells out: "One big difficulty lies in the fact that many parents are in the specific age when you look back and think about what you have achieved in life ... The most problematic case is when parents want to realize some form of late self-fulfilment at the expense of their children" (teacher 6). The teacher then reports about a discussion with a mother (who complained about the teacher's recommendation for Realschule) in which he put forward both the argument of the overestimated importance of the assignment decision (cf. below) and the argument of excessive demands: "I said: But you yourself attended Realschule, and you made it in life (the family operates a business) - so leave it as it is, you can't confer your ambitions on your child, that's dangerous" (teacher 6).

d) Devaluating the significance of the assignment

With respect to options in the future many teachers argue that assignment decisions tend to be overrated. If so, they emphasize that it has not a profound impact on the life course. One teacher spells out: "It's always nice to hear from a weak student you once had to discuss with his parents,...then he went into Realschule and today he's a manager in a big insurance company. School is not that important for life as many teachers think. Fortunately, in our country you always have the opportunity to go ahead. You'll go to evening courses or something else, if you get the feeling `now I'm at that point, now I really want

it` or `now I`m so tightened and so self-assure, I think I can make it und I`ll really try ..."(teacher 6).

The citing of dramatic singular cases which show that nothing is determined by school careers seems to be a common account here, as teachers` comments in the group discussion and in single interviews suggest. Among the prominent examples known and told by nearly all participating teachers is V. who was characterized as "... not very pretty and really dumb, the weakest student I`ve ever had" (teacher 6). Referring to this example, teachers let us know that she worked as a service maid after school and then, with her guests, was able to communicate in French and in English. They continue by emphasizing that later on she married a restaurant owner and became a businesswoman. One of the interviewed teachers explains: "But it was V. She changed in such a positive way. Life decides much later and we shouldn`t overestimate ourselves and our function. I`m convinced of this" (teacher 6). Another teacher adds to this individual case: "And that is actually quite comforting. All these examples, and there are several, reduce the pressure for us ... Fortunately, there are all these examples, which give us confidence, that the options are still open. For me, it`s very comforting. Otherwise, I`d feel like a judge who puts down a guillotine" (teacher 5).

The argument of an overrated importance illustrated by singular cases is also often used to calm down and convince parents who are discontent with the teacher recommendation. In the group interview a teacher said: "When you meet with the parents face to face, it`s extremely important for many parents how we teachers look at it. By using examples of my former students ... I always try to show parents that school assignment is not a life decision. In a situation one to one it`s always difficult, especially for us, the teachers in the 6th grade. ...When you have to decide you are the judge for a certain kind of parents. In this stressful situation you refer to such examples like V or A, to show this (that school assignment is not that important) and to exonerate the parents and ourselves and in the end also the child" (teacher 2).

To sum up, verbal accounts which frame assignment decisions predominantly are related to four criteria all of which do not refer to a student`s performance and achievement. Firstly, emphasis is on uneven aspirations which – for the sake of a student - need to be taken into consideration when a recommendation is made. Secondly, teachers reflect upon future demands which may overwhelm a student in the future. Thirdly and in particular in the case of status inconsistency, teachers articulate the obligation to protect a student from



over-ambitious aspirations of his or her parents. And, fourthly, we find that teachers tend to play down the significance of the assignment and use this argument for allocating a student to a lower level secondary school. In the group interview with teachers we found out that most teachers agree with these accounts. Such accounts serve as collectively available forms of shared knowledge which also can be utilized in order to convince parents to accept a recommendation to a lower level secondary school.

## **(5) Conclusion**

Although in some contributions to the research on social structure and inequality the impact of educational achievement on the availability of social positions is acknowledged, a focus on organizational mechanisms that produce and reproduce this effect is rare. Our contribution aims at compensating this research lag. The emphasis on decision making processes allows for an incorporation of a broad range of organizational approaches. From the developed perspective, discriminating decision making neither has to be related to individual biases and stereotyping as a psychological matter of fact, nor are effects of discrimination based on local and idiosyncratic practices which, in Meyer & Rowan's initial contribution to the new institutionalism, had been emphasized as departures from institutionalised values such as equal opportunity and rational allocation.

In contrast to both lines of research this contribution emphasized on accounts which constitute decision making with discriminating effects. These accounts are collectively available and highly institutionalised. They are communicated to parents and students in order to achieve consent. One type of them aims at legitimating assignment decisions by formal means. This type presents a student's performance and behavioural attitudes which are documented in a rather technical way in order to strengthen the procedural rationality. Another type of accounts is based on broader cultural considerations. It refers to material decision effects on individual cases. The holistic estimation of a student's future potential, the need to protect him or her against excessive demands, and accordance with the supposed long-range aspirations of a student are examples for this type of account. Though both types of accounts represent highly institutionalised values of contemporary societies, they significantly contribute to the reproduction of inequalities which are based on social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship.

The emphasis on accounts sheds light on the robustness of unequal opportunities by offering insights into the framing and embeddedness of decision making processes. This allows

for a critical reflection of the effectiveness of many reforms and programs that aim at overcoming unequal opportunity structures. By locating the causes for such deviations in persistent and taken for granted accounts it offers a new explanation for an old, but yet not completely understood phenomenon. The research perspective may thus offer new insights into the organization-based reproduction of inequality.

It should be mentioned, finally, that the applied perspective is not restricted to education. Instead, it may also stimulate research on inequality which is related to economic work organizations. The assignment of students and issues of educational achievement may then be compared with issues of recruitment and promotion patterns which also contribute to social inequality and which are also providers of unequal opportunities. As in the case of schools, we find a broad range of programs and reforms which aim at a compensation of discriminating effects – and we still find persistent departures from norms on which these programs and reforms are based. The small case of decision making in a Swiss elementary school may thus stimulate a much broader perspective on causes and mechanisms which result in organization based forms of re-producing inequality and discrimination.

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